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Israel Needs to Adjust to a Post-American Age

"We cannot exist alone." That is Israel's national security axiom acknowledged by President Shimon Peres during an address in Jerusalem in November. "For our existence we need the friendship of the United States of America," stressed the Israeli statesman, highlighting the geostrategic reality. "It doesn't sound easy, but this is the truth," he added. It's not easy for a client-state to admit that its own survival depends on a global patron.

It's even more challenging for leaders of a dependent state to recognize that the great power they are relying on may be entering into an imperial twilight time -- that it's not so great anymore. Inertia, wishful thinking and the power of vested interests explains why elites in the empire's capital -- as well as in the provinces -- continue to share in the misconception about the hegemon's ability to exert global influence even as that influence is being eroded.

But after a prolonged "recognition lag" -- extending from the military fiasco in Iraq to the financial meltdown in Wall Street -- it's becoming clear to policymakers in Washington that the U.S. is facing the prospects of geostrategic decline. The military is overstretched in unwinnable wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and a decaying economic base financed by Chinese loans is making it difficult to sustain expansive global commitments. The unipolar moment is coming to an end and rising global powers are creating the conditions for the evolution of multipolarism.

It seems, however, that Israeli leaders continue to operate under the illusion that the U.S. remains the paramount global power. Israeli ultra-nationalists delude themselves that the muddled U.S. policy the Middle East and the Washington's tensions with Israel are temporary, reflecting Barack Obama's temperament and biases. When the Republicans return to power the hegemon will rise again and together with its Israeli deputy will bring order to the Middle East -- just like in the good, old days of George W. Bush.

Members of the Israeli peace camp believe that the role of Washington remains central to a resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict which could encourage the formation of a U.S.-led

regional bloc, ready to contain the threat from Iran and its satellites in Lebanon and Palestine. They regard the support of a global patron not as a substitute for integrating Israel in the Middle East -- but as an element in a strategy to achieve peace.

During the Cold War and in the brief Unipolar Moment -- from the collapse of the Soviet Union to the fall of Saddam Hussein -- Washington was in a position to work with Israeli and Arab moderates in promoting peace. But that window of opportunity for this U.S. role may be closing.

The failed attempt by the neoconservative-guided policies to "remake" the Middle East -- while marginalizing the Israel/Palestine issue -- ended up weakening American power in the Middle East and strengthening Iran and its allies, marking the start of the end of Pax Americana.

So in reality the Obama administration's current difficulties in setting the global agenda, whether that involves North Korean aggression and China's undervalued currency, Iraq and Afghanistan -- or bringing peace to the Holy Land and disabling Iran's nuclear capability -- reflect the long-term structural problems that are eroding American power. They are not going to be resolved anytime soon under either Democratic or Republican presidents and could gradually turn the U.S. into Israel's undependable global patron.

While the U.S. will not collapse with a bang a la the Soviet Union, it will cease being number one and will start playing the role of first among equals. Traditional allies of the U.S. like Turkey, Japan and Brazil, are recognizing that and are hedging their strategic bets and diversifying their global portfolios. They maintain their close ties with Washington while also trying to form alliances with like-minded regional and global powers.

There is no reason why Israel should not consider pursuing such a "hedging" strategy as it recognizes that U.S. military forces are going to disengage from the Middle East in the future and that the U.S.-Israeli alliance -- a product of the unique historical constellation of the Cold War -- is bound to weaken, a result of U.S. geo-strategic decline as of demographic changes, such as the drop in the number of American-Jews and a growing non-European population.

American neoconservatives and Israeli right maintain that support from the American patron could become a substitute for peace with the Arabs and fantasize that Muslim terrorism would ignite a clash of civilizations -- a U.S.-led West vs. the "Caliphate" -- with Israel serving as America's strategic outpost in the Middle East, a Crusader State that for ever will depend on American support for its survival. But Muslim terrorism would only help bolster American isolationism and speed up U.S. disengagement from the Middle East.

In an example of dialectical thinking run amok, Israeli Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman has turned the strategic logic behind the patron-client state relationship on its head. He has "threatened" Washington that unless it supports his radical Zionist agenda, Jerusalem would ally itself with another global player that would supposedly be willing to prop up a militarized anti-Arab Jewish Ghetto in the Middle East.

But why would the European Union (EU), Russia, China, India or Turkey be interested in hooking up with a state that brings into the marriage a dowry in the form of the animosity of the entire Arab and Muslim worlds and the prospect of being entangled in dead-ended peace processes? Israel's promise as a strategic ally is in being a strong military power and a advanced economy playing a constructive role in sustaining a stable and prosperous region, the Singapore of the Middle East -- not its Cuba.

China and India may not be ready to become major players in West Asia, but their growing dependency on Middle East oil is drawing them into more diplomatic activism in the region. The Chinese are actually benefiting from status quo: The U.S. is wasting its resources in trying to manage the Middle East -- while the Chinese continue to grow their economy, ensuring that when

Americans leave -- the Chinese will be the ready to assume more security responsibilities in the region.

And while the EU may be in a midst of an economic and institutional crisis, the Europeans, and in particular, the French, Germans and Brits have important strategic, economic and even demographic (large Muslim communities) interests in the region. They may consider advancing a peace deal under which in exchange for its concessions, Israel would join the EU.

Then there is also the "Turkish Option" -- a democratic, free-market oriented and pro-Western Muslim state emerging as a regional hegemon and in a position to promote Arab-Israeli peace and contain Iran.

No one is suggesting that Israel sue for an instant divorce from Washington and jump into bed with Turkey or China. But in this period of eroding American unipolarism and budding multipolarity, Israel should start reassessing its options -- very much the way its leaders have done in the past.

In fact, two of the major victories of the Zionist movement in the twentieth century followed historic transformations in foreign policy orientations in response to changes in the global balance of power. Chaim Weizmann anticipated the collapse of the Ottoman Empire and made a diplomatic bet on Britain, the new power in the Middle East -- a policy that resulted in the Balfour Declaration. Thirty years later, Ben-Gurion recognized that the British Empire was crumbling -- and that the U.S. and the Soviet Union were the new global powers -- and took advantage of the evolving Cold War to win support for the new Jewish State.

'Indeed, while it runs contrary to reigning narrative about the American-Israeli "special relationship," it's important to recall that Stalin's Soviet Union was the most enthusiastic supporter of establishing Israel in 1948. Moscow recognized Israel immediately after the state was proclaimed and provided it with arms, while it took the Americans more than a year to grant de jure recognition to Israel, on which they imposed an arms embargo.

Israel cannot exist alone. But as an adherent of realpolitik like Peres recalls from his own experience, interests do change. Peres was, after all, a proponent of a "European orientations" and the main architect of the Israeli alliance with France which served as Israel's main source of arms in the 1950s and early 1960s and helped it develop its nuclear arsenal. Indeed, Israel's survival depends on recognizing that international friendships come and go. It doesn't sound easy, but this is the truth.

A longer version of this commentary was published in the Israeli daily Haaretz

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